



# HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND IDEAS FOR THE ARTICULATE EXECUTIVE

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## A Call to Action for Business Writing

by John Clayton



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# A Call to Action for Business Writing

*Keep your prose moving with strong verbs.*

**V**ERBS PUSH YOUR meaning across to the reader. Occupying the most powerful position in the sentence, verbs show action, convey sense, and engage the reader. Whether you're writing a software requirements document, a job description for a new employee, or a marketing brochure for your company's new paperweight, you need to use verbs to energize your writing.

Just as people like movies filled with action and sculptures that show movement, readers care first about actions—who's doing what to whom? Similarly, they like business documents that indicate the actions being performed.

Your requirements document comes to life when it describes what the software does rather than the features it needs. Likewise, the employee job description is more effective when it lists actions the employee will take, rather than mere attributes the applicant should possess.

A paperweight just sits on your desk. But a savvy marketer will nevertheless demonstrate its properties with verbs. She won't merely describe it using nouns (such as "granite" or "crystal") and adjectives (such as "heavy" or "attractive"). She'll wow buyers with what it will *do* ("anchor loose papers" or "impress visitors with its beauty").

Sometimes, the action in a sentence hides somewhere other than the verb. Consider the sentence, "The technology treadmill is constantly moving." This sentence has action: move. But it's not expressed in the verb. Many weak sentences follow this pattern, saying that something is in a state of action. The stronger version says that something *acts*: "The technology treadmill *moves* constantly."

Is—and all forms of the verb "to be"—is passive, because it merely states or equates, rather than showing action. Passive verbs are weak verbs. As William Zinsser writes in the classic

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book *On Writing Well*, "Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum. Active verbs push hard; passive verbs tug fitfully."

Of course, sometimes you do indeed want a passive, or "linking," verb. As Linda Flower writes in *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*, "If you want to state a definition, linking verbs are often very powerful ('To be or not to be, that is the question'). If, however, you are discussing an action, whether it is physical, mental, or metaphoric, linking verbs can weaken your sentence."

Grammatical purists hate nouns that have turned into verbs, such as *prioritize*, *demonize*, or *strategize*. But at least the sentiment behind such transformations makes sense: to put action in sentences. "The priorities are..." becomes "We prioritized for..." "He was seen as bad" becomes "They demonized him." Granted, it may be better to use traditional verbs ("We set priorities as..." "They turned him into a demon"). But at least the verbified nouns show action.

In fact, the opposite phenomenon—turning verbs into nouns—equally threatens the strength of your writing, even though it's often grammatically correct. For example, the weak "tech-

nology treadmill" sentence above transformed the verb "move" into its noun form "moving." Likewise, if you write "Technology is a necessary enabler..." you transform the verb "enable" into its noun form "enabler," combined with the weak verb "is."

If you write, "The software should allow for centralization of administration," not only have you used an "-ize" verb (invoking the wrath of the grammatical purists), but you've transformed it to its eunuch-like noun form, where it loses its sense of action. Beware of the verb "allow," which lies almost as passively as "is." Shouldn't the software itself act? (Or will it merely sit there while your employees find other tools to centralize administration?) Then show it acting: "The software should centralize administration."

Furthermore, Zinsser notes that short, Anglo-Saxon verbs punch up your sentences better than long, Latin-derived ones. For example, he commends verbs such as *hit*, *poke*, *flail*, and *squash* while condemning *perpetrate*. Though some people hope that big words show how smart they are, Zinsser disagrees. "Of the 701 words in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address...505 are words of one syllable and 122 are words of two syllables." Long words, and especially long verbs, sap readers' energy.

Additionally, Donald M. Murray, author of *The Craft of Revision*, says that when you use an adverb to further describe a verb, maybe you haven't found the right verb. You "hope to catch the meaning between two words, and meaning is better caught with one word. At the most important points in my text I double my concentration on finding *the* verb...."

How do you "verbify" your writing?

**Before you write a sentence, think of the action it will convey.** Write that down, as a verb—then build the rest of the sentence around it.

For example, when writing a job description, you might think of the action “coordinate.” Write it down in its verb form (“coordinate”), and don’t let anyone change it to a noun (“be a coordinator” or “allow for coordination”). Similarly, in describing your desired software, you should write down verbs to describe the actions it will perform. Useful words here include *manage*, *track*, *calculate*, and *generate*.

An inert object like a paperweight creates a bigger challenge. But remember that emotions can be actions too: “You’ll love its vibrant color.” And even when there’s no movement, you can express ideas with action verbs. “It organizes your current files.” “It prevents wind disturbances.”

**As much as possible, use concrete nouns—ideally ones that involve people—rather than generalized or conceptual nouns.** When you put a person in your sentence, he or she will be more likely to act. Zinsser cites the example “The common reaction is incredulous laughter.” *Reaction* is an impersonal noun embodying a vague concept. “Turn these cold sentences around,” Zinsser advises. “Get people doing things: ‘Most people just laugh with disbelief.’”

Any time you’re tempted to write down a conceptual noun, ask yourself if there isn’t a person behind it. For example, *hostility*, *utilization*, and *consensus* are all states that people achieve. When you start your sentence with a noun like this, it won’t go anywhere. But when you start your sentence with people (or even an object that sometimes acts like a person, such as a computer or a committee), you can show them achieving that state.

“Don’t get caught holding a bag that doesn’t have anything in it but abstract nouns,” Zinsser writes. “You’ll sink to the bottom of the lake and never be seen again.”

If searching for the right vigorous verb slows down your creativity too much,

go ahead and write sentences with weak verbs, just to get the ideas down on paper. Then you can go back and revise. Your computer’s search function provides particular value here.

**Search for forms of “to be.”** You can replace most of them. When you keep in mind some of the pitfalls this article describes, you’ll find your sentences easy to turn around.

Common forms of “to be” include *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, and *has been*. You might also search for similarly weak verbs such as “allow” and “seem.” (*Seem* is not an active verb. In fact, “The paperweight seems purple” is actually *weaker* than “The paperweight is purple.”)

**Search for certain word endings that signal weak verbs.** For example, Murray says that in his own writing he searches for “ing” and “ly.” A word that ends in “ing” is often a noun form of a verb (such as “Centralizing is a key function of the software...” or “Coordinating between departments is part of this job...”). When you take off the “ing” and use the word as a verb, your writing becomes both more active and more direct.

A word that ends in “ly” is usually an adverb. As noted above, the presence of an adverb often means you haven’t used the right verb. Instead of “said softly” use the stronger verb “whispered.” Other times the adverb is unnecessary: “whispered softly” is redundant — a strong active verb carries the full meaning on its own.

**Search for word endings that represent the noun form of verbs.** Flower writes, “Many of the heavy, polysyllabic nouns that make prose hard to read were made in the first place by adding a Latin ending to a verb. Often, your sentences will improve if you transform these nouns back into their original form.”

Thus, searching for “tion” prompts you to change “resumption” back into its source verb, “resume.” Searching for “ment”

might highlight an “announcement” that should be simply “announced.” And searching for “ance” will help you put life back in “performance” by shortening it to its verb form “perform.”

**Seek to lower the noun-to-verb ratio in your sentences.** Flower recommends counting the number of nouns and verbs in each sentence. Then you can make your prose more forceful by lowering the number of nouns and increasing the number of verbs.

She cites this noun-heavy example: “The effect of the overuse of nouns in writing is the placing of excessive strain upon the inadequate number of verbs and the resultant prevention of the flow of thought.” That sentence has eleven nouns and one verb (“is”). To lower the ratio, she changes the sentence to, “Using too many nouns in writing places strain on verbs and prevents the flow of thought.” The new sentence has seven nouns and two verbs—“places” and “prevents”—both active verbs).

People dread reading business documents in part because the sentences so often lack action. But business itself doesn’t lack action—successful managers act constantly. Make your documents show this action. Then others will want to read all about it. □

—**John Clayton** is an independent business writer who also teaches at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Mont. He can be reached at [hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu](mailto:hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu)

#### FURTHER READING

*The Craft of Revision*

by Donald M. Murray

2000 • Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

*On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*

by William Zinsser

1998 • HarperReference

*Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*

by Linda Flower

2001 • Harcourt Brace Jovanovich